BRISBANE RIVER POETRY

AFTER QUEENSLAND'S DISASTROUS SUMMER FLOODS, RUTH BLAIR DISCOVERS A RICH TRADITION OF BRISBANE RIVER POETRY.

'The river is getting its shine back', a friend remarked some little while after the 2011 big flood. Recently I walked across the Eleanor Schonell Bridge (the 'green' pedestrian and bus bridge slung across the river between Dutton Park and The University of Queensland) reading poetry by Samuel Wagan Watson and Luke Beesley embedded in the footpath and embossed on the railing. Because the bridge is so high you have almost a bird's eye view of this reach of the river. And on this day, with the stretch of water smooth down to the bend, the shine–a velvety brown shine, 'fawn-thick', Dimitris Tsaloumas calls it–was almost dazzling. Since the January flood, I've wanted to know more about how, from the time of European settlement, the river has been celebrated and I've gone hunting, especially for poems. What follows are reflections on a trove of poems, from 1859 to today.[1] The river's shine is a recurring theme.

In his Foreword to the collection *Rivers* (the work of three poets: John Kinsella, Peter Porter and Sean O'Brien), Kinsella writes, 'Creation myths, the "world river", sources of life and death, diverse ecologies, connectors and "edges" of habitats, places of commerce and spiritual significance–rivers bind life together across continents'.[2] Poets can help us understand how the river that we criss-cross or walk beside or scoot up and down on fast ferries does things to us we may be only remotely aware of; how this sinuous, impressive and idiosyncratic, 'this short but flash-flood river', as Peter Porter calls it, anchors whatever sense of belonging we might have to this place, and for visitors anchors impressions and experience. A Howe, in 'Evening on the Brisbane River' (1912), has a sense of the way in which the river enters the souls of those who live beside it:

> The beauty of the River is like a benediction
> To the workers passing homeward by the winding, shaded Road:
> …
> For they feel the gentle influence of the River's quiet teaching
> As its beauty o'er them casts its dreamy spell;
> With its ever-changing currents, its tender curves and windings,
> It speaks of far off fair things, and an endless story tells.

Across the poems I've been reading a story unfolds, both of learning to see the river and of learning to live with it and alongside it. Early poets clearly stand apart from it, admiring, and weaving the river into a paean to European colonisation and to 'progress', as in 'The River of Queensland' (Anon., 1859):

> Hail to thee life stream of our now infant nation.
> Thy glory shall be ours where the Bay extended,
> And the Pacific leaves its billows on our strand,
> Bidding us to mould this birthright of our children
> Till poets rise to tell the wonders of Queensland.

Above: *WA Clarson,* Brisbane, *original lithograph printed as a supplement to* The Illustrated Sydney News, *30 August 1888. Digitally enhanced by Francisco Roelas.*

Below: *Curving roads and pathways mimic the sinuous bends of the Brisbane River. Photo by Mila Zincone.*

I acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples who have lived and live along the Brisbane River from its source to its mouth and who have always known how to respect a great river.

Peter Porter's poem, 'The role of the Brisbane River in the fortunes of my family' (2002) gives, more than a century later, a sense of the disturbing realities and costs of European fortune-seeking. The Porter clan, arriving in the nineteenth century, sees:

> a river altering the lives
> of men and beasts, for all the world as if
> a feud as old as that of sun and rain
> were set off by these migrant magistrates
> hoping to make careers twelve thousand miles
> from home.

The end of this poem, mimicking the stately iambic pentameter and locutions of many of its predecessors, is a parody of early celebrations of colonisation:

> The river's cowed today as must befit
> a State's proud capital, its comely banks
> well-skirted by broad drives and galleries,
> its smooth and smiling surface now outranks
> the plush riparian pleasures of the Yarra's
> saunter through Victoria's savannahs,
> and Queensland, once Louisiana, turns
> Super Texas, *primus inter pares*.

Glimpses of a developing city are common in the poems. A Howe observed (1912): 'From tall chimneys in the city smoke wreaths are lightly drifting, / shrouding shining waters with a veil of whirling grey.' Mabel Forrest, in 'Brisbane River' (1916), begins with industry at the mouth of her personified river:

> She shudders by the shambles where
> The dawning brought an oily calm
> And iron roofs are bleak and bare
> Above the works at Eagle Farm.

Samuel Wagan Watson, who is our great poet of the city and its river today, relates progress, politics and communication in a richly dense poem, 'smoke signals' (2004):

> I remember construction cranes like herds of frozen
> praying-mantis, high on the steamy Bjelke-Petersen plateau above
> a brown snake-coiled river. It was from this view, at the age of 4,
> that I learnt to read the columns of Brisbane city.

Watson's poems on the Eleanor Schonell Bridge, 'Dreaming river triptych' and 'On the transom of ghosts' fittingly move into a different register that is both encomium and elegy, drawing on ancient European and Aboriginal heritage:

> Never the same this river–Archaic vein,
> snaking through the land's dreaming
> cortex–Submerging provinces; the
> past, present and future–An Aquarelle
> triptych cultural on every tide…
>
> On this transom, the river's dawning
> skin … Stand here … give your breath to
> the fleeting mist … Stand here … in the crimson
> shadow of Cootha's
> dusk … Stand here … and whisper upon
> night's canvas, whirlpool eyes, the song-
> lines of Kurilpa's ghost …

Others too have sung the river. In Mabel Forrest's 'Brisbane River' (1916), the personified river is 'a blue-eyed wanton' who 'drags her skirts beneath the bridge, / The ripple kisses on her mouth'; but industry is never far away, and there is death in this Arcady:

> Sometimes within her reedy curves,
> Sometimes across her sandy bars,
> A drowned face, tired of every day,
> Awaits the judgment of the stars.

Her similarly titled 1927 poem, expresses sheer joy at the beauty of this city with its winding river, 'so full of godhead do we feel today':

> Bright Prussian-blue the winding river lies;
> And here some milk-white seagulls, like a reef
> Found in warm seas beneath pale, tropic skies,
> Rest in mid-stream.

The river in this poem is blue, not the brown we see now, intensified after the flood. For George Essex Evans, in 'Adrift: a Brisbane River reverie' (1891), the 'steel-blue waters flow / With gloom and glint'. For Emily Bulcock, in 1924, the 'delphinium blue' of the sky, at the time of Oxley's coming, was mirrored in the river 'clearer than today'. A not insignificant reason for searching out these poems is to see what they can tell us about the river. Observation, though not the major driving force, is nevertheless the seed from which the poems grow. I have already mentioned the river's shine–perhaps the most commonly observed feature. The river breeze and the tidal nature of the river are frequently alluded to. An early poet (Anon., 1859), describes the river as if it flowed upstream: 'From a fringed island bay flows the glorious river / With flood to float argosies safely to our shore'. For Mabel Forrest, the bay is a lover waiting to meet the river (1916). Manfred Jurgensen writes: 'shadows lengthen. absence carries, / hours sail into the shining tide'. (1999). Associated with the tidal nature of the river are mangroves, with sinister connotations in early poems:

> The fretful river rolls past mead and scar
> To the dark mangrove, fringing on the deep,
> Abreast the bar. (Evans, 1891)
>
> [the mud]
> Vomiting forth its slime and clay
> Where the mangrove areas point the way.
> (Lucas, 1906)

Above: *Vessels stranded in Brisbane's Botanic Gardens in 1893. From an* Album of Queensland Flood Views, 1893, *Philp family papers, UQFL28, Album 3, Image 25a.*

Below and previous page: *A cyclist crosses the Eleanor Schonell Bridge. Photo by Mila Zincone.*

But a century later, Laurie Duggan calls a collection of his poetry *Mangroves*, as if inspired, perhaps, by their multiple root systems–their one-in-many aspect–or for the associations of their dragging 'against the current'.[3]

The trees and plants that grow alongside the river appear in the poems; the forests and gardens and the iconic Botanical Gardens; the bats ('Ah, just as well / I fell in love with Jacarandas, and colonies of dark-eyed bats' [Wollert, 1993]); and the birds: pelicans for Silvana Gardner (1987), who describes their return after disturbances by bridge-building, seagulls for Mabel Forrest (1927); for Alexander Muir, in the 'lofty scrubs' on the river banks, 'birds in strange rich plumage' (1899). A century later, for the visitor Dimitris Tsaloumas, the birds are an unknown, even for a Victorian: 'strange birds / land speechless at my feet / and look at me like children' (2000).

One of the notable features of the Brisbane River is its sinuosity. 'The river winds, the river winds', begins one of Mabel Forrest's poems (1916). Samuel Wagan Watson describes it as a 'brown snake-coiled river'. For Evans, too, it is a 'sinuous snake', a 'tortuous river'. Its winding nature makes a mockery of 'north side' and 'south side'; nevertheless, there is a strong sense of the river as a dividing line. Crossings are a common topic. The first bridge, a timber bridge opened in 1865, is the occasion for a humorous statement of the north-south divide in SG Mee's poem, 'Dialogue between the two Brisbanes' (1866). The timber bridge was replaced by the iron Victoria Bridge in 1893. JH Bardwell has a vision, in 1924, of a river 'by stately bridges spanned' but the next bridge, the Grey Street Bridge (later William Jolly Bridge) was not completed until 1932 and the Story Bridge not till 1940. Meanwhile, there were, and still are, ferries criss-crossing the river. In 1896 a ferry, *The Pearl*, sank, the tragedy recorded in an anonymous poem in *The Worker*. Lawrence Bourke's lovely poem, 'Night crossing the Brisbane River' (1985) describes a ferry crossing under the moon:

> The ferryman indolently uncoils his arm
> slipping the hawser from its cleat he leans
> out and pushes the jetty gently into the dark.

Manfred Jurgensen finds a metaphor for a relationship in the ferry crossings:

> you and I are crossing ferries
> to seek, to know, to feel, to praise
> the current of these fleeting days.

And there are the flood poems, which are a topic in themselves. They are represented by Thomas Shapcott's 'The river at Brisbane' which is reproduced on page 10 of this issue.

I would like to be able to say that I see a clear evolution of ideas across the poems. I had expected to see a development from observation to a sense of the intertwining of human lives with the life of the river. But a sense of belonging with the river is not new. I quoted at the beginning of this essay from A Howe's 1912 poem, 'Evening on the Brisbane River', where the poet is sensitive to the 'gentle influence' of the river on careworn workers. Mabel Forrest in her poem 'In the gardens, Brisbane' (1901) entwines the river and its nearby gardens with thoughts of a past love. It is clear, even in SG Mee's humorous poem, that the river is inseparable from the fabric of the city's life. Thomas Shapcott says:

> You are surrounded. Loops and reaches, steep
> banks
> and the breeze that comes off water weave
> everywhere

Yet I do find, in later poetry, that something else is going on, a deeper sense of involvement with the river. For Laurie Duggan, who lived in Brisbane on the river at Teneriffe at the turn of the new century, the meaning of the river becomes the very process of writing:

> Marks on paper, gradations on screen
> as ephemeral as the factory light oscillating
> upside down in the river: it's there every night
> cut by the wake of ferries, resuming its shape, though
> this itself is illusion…
> …
> – even in print meaning shifts,
> we are caught by different angles every time.
> ('Louvres', p. 49)

In 'The river at Brisbane' Thomas Shapcott's memories of childhood are involved in the moods and the twists and turns of the river. Rhyll McMaster's poem about the 1974 flood, 'Profiles of my father', is a personal, not a public statement. In Samuel Wagan Watson's collection *smoke encrypted whispers*, the river is seamlessly part of the story or stories, the experiences, the feelings. Luke Beesley's poems on the pavement of the Eleanor Schonell bridge build on stories collected as oral history in association with its construction. The more we can see such stories as connected with place, the more aware we are of belonging and of responsibility.

'The river is a strong brown god,' wrote TS Eliot in *Four quartets*, remembering the Mississippi of his

homeland. But the Brisbane, impressive river that it is, does not appear in this light. Mabel Forrest is the only poet I have found who attempts, reflecting a common interest of artists of her generation, to give it a European-style mythic status. Samuel Wagan Watson's river 'snaking through the land's dreaming cortex' is closer to the mythic mark than Forrest's Olympians. There are, too, across the poems, few in the way of conventional metaphorical invocations, associating rivers, for example, with the process of life. George Essex Evans comes to mind here as an exception, but his analogy is less with the span of human life than with the idea of progress. The poet observes sea birds near the mouth of the river:

> These are the harbingers from voyaged seas:
> Who knows what seas of thought man yet may sail
> As science slowly sifts Life's mysteries–
> And lifts the veil?

Yet Evans's is also a literal river and, I would attest, the river remains doggedly so. Its 'spiritual significance' (recalling Kinsella's remark at the beginning of this essay) is not grasped through the larger available Western myths. Perhaps it is too short, 'this short but flash flood river' (Porter), too unusual to represent the grand narrative of life. And if it is about death, it is the real bodies Mabel Forrest (1916) and Robert Morison (1984) find floating in the river, or the dead from *The Pearl*. No, the Brisbane River is (paradoxically, for all its fury at flood times) 'a quiet teacher' (Howe), its mysteries a delicate and reluctant affair, spied in the gaps:

> Air circulates through the latticed wharf
> as the brown river laps and bubbles underneath.
> A small goanna crosses the path
> lifting itself from the hot surface.
> Mangroves drag against the current, out
> from the tidal rocks.' ('Louvres', p. 51)

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NOTE: A fuller list of river poetry compiled by Ruth Blair is available with the online version of this publication at: www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/publications/publications.html.

REFERENCES:

1. This essay would not have been possible without the help of *AustLit–the Australian Literature Resource*. It would have taken half a lifetime to find these poems without this resource. Most of the material I discuss was located in the Fryer Library. Thanks to librarians there and at the John Oxley Library. I acknowledge also the helpful section on the Brisbane River in Stan Mellick's *Writers' footprints: a Queensland literary companion*.
2. Peter Porter, Sean O'Brien, John Kinsella. *Rivers*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2002, p. 9.
3. 'Louvres', p. 51. 'Louvres' is a collection of short poems with many references to the Brisbane River, within the collection *Mangroves*.

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Top: *Albert Street from Queen Street, Brisbane, during the 1893 flood. From an* Album of Queensland Flood Views, 1893*, Philp family papers, UQFL28, Album 3, Image 21.*

Below: *Walter Taylor Bridge, Indooroopilly. Photo by Mila Zincone.*